Looking East from the Classical World: Colonialism, Culture, and Trade from Alexander the Great to Shapur I

Author(s): Fergus Millar

Source: *The International History Review*, Sep., 1998, Vol. 20, No. 3 (Sep., 1998), pp. 507-531

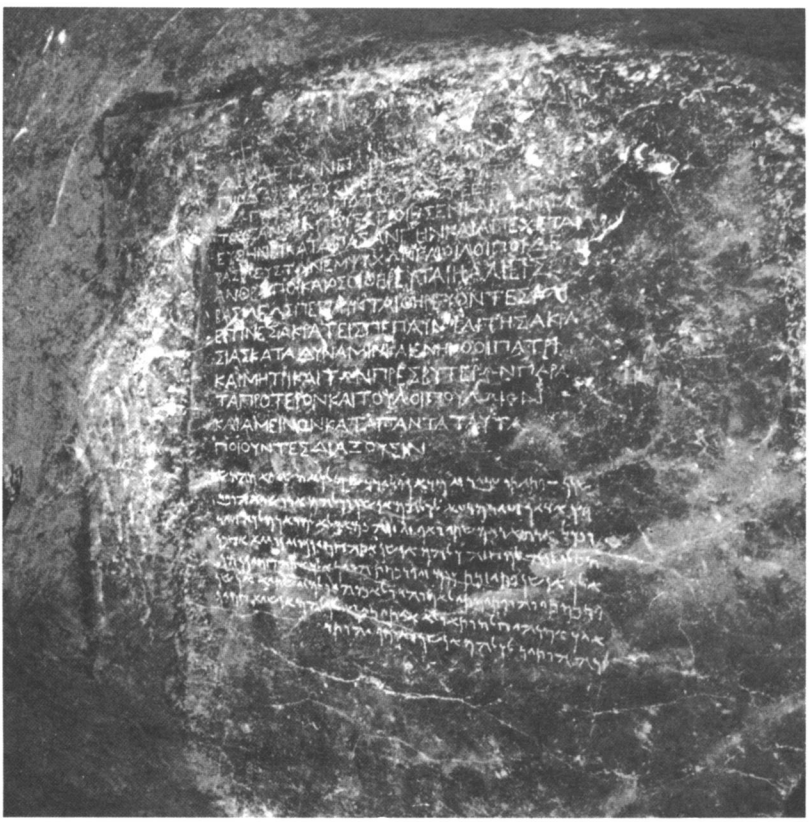
Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd.

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/40101315

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms

Taylor & Francis, Ltd. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The International History Review*



Inscription of Aśoka from Kandahar.
Mid-3rd Century BC. Limestone. Height: 45 cm; width, 69.5 cm.
Kabul Museum. Courtesy: DAFA, Paris.

FERGUS MILLAR

Looking East from the Classical World: Colonialism, Culture, and Trade from Alexander the Great to Shapur I

THE EMPEROR TRAJAN'S arrival at the head of the Persian Gulf in AD 116 was the only visit there by a Roman army in the course of the wars against the Parthian and Sassanid empires which continued sporadically for centuries. The occasion gave rise to a well-known and illuminating anecdote, told by Cassius Dio in his *Roman History*. As it happens, both the author and his *History* themselves illustrate the relationship between the Classical world and Asia; for Dio was a Greek who came from Bithynia, the north-west corner of modern Turkey, but who was also a Roman senator and was twice consul in the early third century. Looking back to Trajan's campaign a hundred years earlier, he writes in Book LXVIII of his eighty-book *History* in Greek: 'Then he came to the Ocean itself, and when he had learned its nature and had seen a ship sailing to India, he said, "I would certainly have made an attempt against the Indians, if I were still young". For he began to think about the Indians, and was curious about their affairs, and said how lucky Alexander had been.'[1]

The anecdote exemplifies one aspect of the relationship between the Classical world and the peoples of Asia: imperialist dreams and ambitions, and actual conquest, whether long-lasting or ephemeral. Along with this went an ideology of colonialism underpinning a vision of the export of Greek, or Graeco-Roman, city-life and civilization to distant lands. These goals cause conceptual, and even moral, problems for us, obliging us to ask whether we can detach ourselves from a Western imperialist perspective. The difficulty arises not only from our lack of linguistic and scholarly training in the numerous and varied cultures, languages, and scripts in use

Earlier versions were presented at the Anglo-American Conference of Historians in London in July 1997 and at Macquarie University, Sydney, in November 1997. I thank Amélie Kuhrt for criticism and Jenny Graham for drawing the map.

1 Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, lxviii. 29 (Loeb ed., viii. 415-17). For Trajan's campaign see J. Bennett, *Trajan: Optimus Princeps: A Life and Times* (London, 1997), ch. xiii.

The International History Review, xx. 3: September 1998, pp. 507-788.
CN ISSN 0707-5332 © *The International History Review*. All International Rights Reserved.

in ancient Iran, Central Asia, and India, but also from the lack in some areas of 'native' written evidence, or the existence only of texts whose date and character is profoundly uncertain. In parts of Asia, the only 'Asian' culture or belief-system encountered turns out to have been one constructed by Graeco-Roman observers. Detaching oneself from a 'Classical', or Western, perspective, therefore, is more difficult than it might appear at first glance.

This essay will look eastwards from the Mediterranean. It will set out the broad lines of Graeco-Roman military and political involvement in Asia, from the Mediterranean through Iran to Central Asia and northern India; point to the surviving traces of Greek culture and language from these regions; and discuss for which possible trade routes to the East we have reliable contemporary evidence for the Roman imperial period. To say that we do not have reliable evidence for a supposed trade route is not to claim that no such route existed. Nonetheless, no adequate contemporary evidence survives from the Classical period to demonstrate the existence of a 'Silk Road' crossing Central Asia to China.

Beyond the concrete, prosaic issues of wars and states, documents and traders, lie more complex questions of cultural and religious history, and of profound mutual influence. The essay does not attempt to explain, for example, the influence of Babylonian mythology and astronomy, or of 'Zoroaster' and 'Iranian dualism'. Nor does it explain the origins and spread of Manichaeism, or of the preaching of Christianity in Asia. But it does examine the two remarkable Hellenistic inscriptions which represent the only known expression of Buddhism in Classical Greek.

The essay focuses on the six centuries following Alexander's conquests. The culture of Archaic Greece, from the eighth to the sixth centuries and contemporary with the Neo-Assyrian, Babylonian, and Achaemenid Persian empires, emerged in the shadow of the major Near Eastern cultures of Anatolia, Phoenicia, Egypt, and Babylonia. Several key developments, for instance the derivation of the Greek alphabet from the Phoenician and the debt of Greek conceptions of the gods to Egypt, were recognized by Herodotus as early as the fifth century BC.[1] The importance of Babylonian mythology for early Greek literature, on the other hand, was unknown to Herodotus, and only become clear in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with the publication of Akkadian texts.[2] Whether we think of art, literature, astronomy, or conceptions of the world, the debt of early Greece

1 Herodotus v. 58-9 ('Phoenician letters'); ii. 41, 50 (borrowing of divine names from Egypt).

2 Note esp. the useful collection and translation, *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others*, trans. and notes S. Dalley (New York, 1989), and the much fuller presentation of the material by B. R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*: I-II (Bethesda, 1993).

to 'Asia' is accepted by everyone, and is the subject of important scholarly works.[1]

The 'Classical' period of Greek history, following the successful Greek resistance to the invasions by Darius and Xerxes in the Persian Wars, was shaped by political and military relations with the Achaemenid empire. For much of the sixth, fifth, and fourth centuries, the Persians ruled the western shores of the Aegean, where a large number of Greek cities were located, and Persian control extended round the eastern shores of the Mediterranean as far as Egypt and much of present-day Libya, where there had also been extensive Greek settlement. The relationship between the Greek world and Persia, and the Greeks' resistance to Persian conquest, was the subject of Herodotus' *Histories*, of Xenophon's *Anabasis* and, to a certain extent, of his *Hellenica*, and of Isocrates' remarkable analysis of the political situation in the Greek world in 380 BC, the *Panegyricus*.[2]

The cultural and artistic influences of the period are difficult to evaluate, not least because the empire ruled by the Persians embraced so many contrasting cultures, from Anatolia (with its Greek cities) to Phoenicia, Egypt, Babylonia, and their own homeland of Iran (the great mystery) itself. Although important exchanges in art and architecture occurred,[3] most significant for the future was the emergence in the fifth and fourth centuries of a Greek ethnic, or consciously national, identity, which contrasted Greeks with *barbaroi*.[4] With that identity came indications of a claim to military and political superiority. As Greeks, for instance, practised athletics naked, in the sunlight, Xenophon records that at Ephesos in 395 the king of Sparta ordered that Persian prisoners being put up for sale should be stripped, to show their Greek captors how soft and white their bodies were.[5] Such attitudes led to a tendency to see non-Greeks in Asia as 'lacking in spirit' and as not in possession of, or being incapable of exercising, political rights.[6] From this followed the perception that the Persian empire might not be as strong as its vast extent suggested, an argument made by Isocrates in the *Panegyricus* on the evidence of the 'Anabasis', the 'march up-country' in 401 in support of Cyrus' claim to the Persian throne.

1 Note, e.g., S. P. Morris, *Daidalos and the Origins of Greek Art* (Princeton, 1992); W. Burkert, *The Orientalising Revolution: Near Eastern Influence on Greek Culture in the Early Archaic Age* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992); or most recently the massive work by M. West, *The East Face of Helicon: West Asiatic Elements in Early Poetry and Myth* (Oxford, 1997).

2 Translated in the Loeb ed. of Isocrates, i. 116ff. This much-underestimated text would be well worth studying as perhaps the earliest example of a systematic essay in strategic-political analysis.

3 See M. C. Miller, *Athens and Persia in the Fifth Century BC: A Study in Cultural Receptivity* (Cambridge, 1997).

4 See esp. E. Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self-definition through Tragedy* (New York, 1989).

5 Xenophon, *Hellenica* ii. 4, 19 (Loeb ed., i. 239).

6 E.g., Aristotle *Politics* vii. 7 (1327b).

Cyrus' forces had included Greek mercenaries, among them Xenophon himself, on whom Isocrates based his claim that the empire was more vulnerable than it seemed.[1]

When a new power, the Macedonian kingdom, arose in the mid-fourth century on the northern borders of the Greek world, it was Isocrates again who in 346 petitioned Philip II to take up an explicitly imperialist and colonialist role against Persia on behalf of the Greek world, partly to provide employment for the large numbers of unsettled mercenaries who, Isocrates believed, were destabilizing it:

> What opinion must we expect the world will have of you ... if you undertake to conquer the whole empire of the King, or, at any rate, to wrest from it a vast extent of territory and sever from it – to use a current phrase – 'Asia from Cilicia to Sinope' [western Asia Minor]; and if, furthermore, you undertake to establish cities in this region, and to settle in permanent abodes those who now, for lack of the daily necessities of life, are wandering from place to place and committing outrages upon whomsoever they encounter?[2]

This is not the place for a detailed account of how Philip's son Alexander (r. 336-323 BC) not only fulfilled the programme, but also exceeded it.[3] Alexander's conquests may be divided into two distinct phases with markedly different long-term consequences. The first phase, which itself exceeded anything Isocrates had envisaged, may be defined as the termination of the Persian dynasty by the conquest of the parts of the Near East with which the Greeks were familiar – Anatolia (though not all of it at first), Syria, Palestine (hence, with momentous consequences, the small Jewish community), Egypt, and Babylonia, which, as a prosperous settled area with an ancient culture, was one of the heartlands of the Persian empire[4] – and by the capture of the Achaemenid 'capitals', Susa and Ecbatana.

There followed in phase two Alexander's still almost entirely unintelligible expedition across Iran and Central Asia to present-day Afghanistan and Tajikistan, before turning south to the Indus Valley, and home again by way of a gruelling march along the northern shores of the Indian Ocean and the eastern shores of the Persian Gulf.[5]

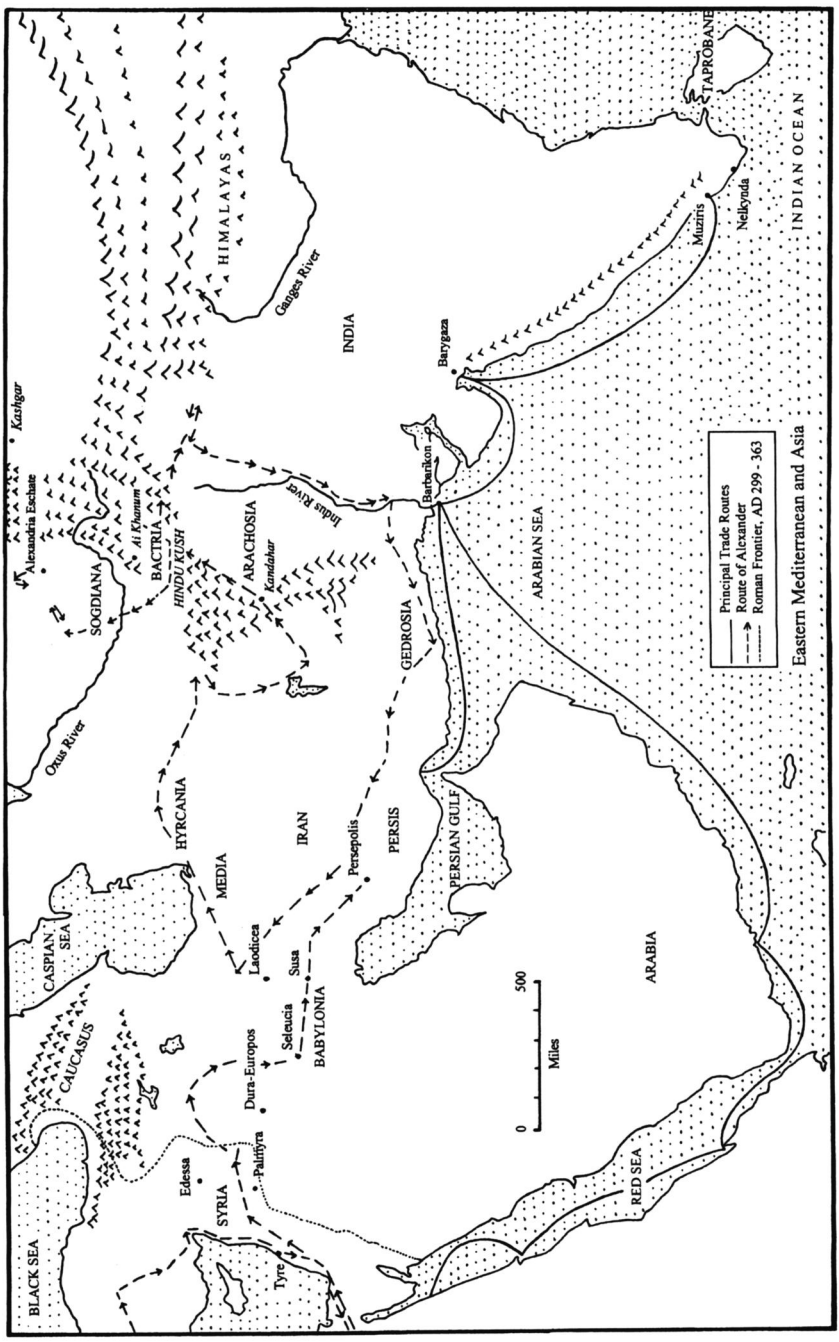
1 Isocrates, *Panegyricus* 145-9 (Loeb ed., i. 211-15).

2 Isocrates, *Address to Philip* 120 (Loeb ed., i. 319).

3 For modern accounts, see A. B. Bosworth, *Conquest and Empire: The Reign of Alexander the Great* (Cambridge, 1988) and P. Briant, *Alexandre le Grand* (4th ed., Paris, 1994).

4 See, e.g., M. Stolper, 'Mesopotamia, 482-330 BC', in *Cambridge Ancient History*: IV: *Persia, Greece, and the Western Mediterranean, c. 525 to 479 BC*, ed. J. Boardman et al. (New York, 1994), pp. 234ff., and P. Briant, *De Cyrus à Alexandre: Histoire de l'empire perse* (Paris, 1996), *passim*, esp. pp. 500ff.

5 For this extraordinary episode, covering the years 330 to 324 BC, see A. B. Bosworth, *Alexander and the East: The Tragedy of Triumph* (New York, 1996) and, for the Central Asian context, F. L. Holt, *Alexander the Great and Bactria: The Formation of a Greek Frontier in Central Asia* (New York, 1988).


Eastern Mediterranean and Asia
Principal Trade Routes
Route of Alexander
Roman Frontier, AD 299 - 363
0
500
Miles
BLACK SEA
CASPIAN SEA
CAUCASUS
SYRIA
Edessa
Palmyra
Dura-Europos
Seleucia
BABYLONIA
Susa
Laodicea
MEDIA
HYRCANIA
Oxus River
SOGDIANA
Alexandria Eschate
Kashgar
Ai Khanum
BACTRIA
HINDU KUSH
ARACHOSIA
Kandahar
Indus River
HIMALAYAS
Ganges River
INDIA
Barbarikon
Barygaza
GEDROSIA
Persepolis
PERSIS
IRAN
PERSIAN GULF
ARABIAN SEA
ARABIA
RED SEA
Muziris
Nelkynda
TAPROBANE
INDIAN OCEAN

Both phases of conquest had important long-term effects. The first created a 'Greek' world in Anatolia, the Levant, and Egypt, and to a lesser degree Mesopotamia, which lasted for more than a thousand years. The second gave rise to the imperialist and colonialist dreams which were to haunt the Roman Empire from the late Republic into the Christian period, and to complex cultural interchanges, still very little understood, of which the existence of the two Greek Buddhist texts discussed below is a pointed reminder. Alexander's march also marked out the part of Asia with which the Classical world would become reasonably familiar, and with which it enjoyed regular contact during the Roman Empire. Of the area beyond Alexander's march, little or nothing was known.

Viewed from the Mediterranean, the part of the Near East stretching from present-day Turkey to Egypt became, as a result of Alexander's conquests, effectively Greek. Greek culture was dominant, Greek cities and Greek architecture were visible everywhere, and the Greek language was used both for monumental inscriptions and perishable documents. The depth of the penetration by Hellenism, the nature of Greek settlement and colonialism, and the character of the principal successor-state, the Seleucid kingdom, which inherited many features of the Persian empire, have all, however, been the subject of vigorous debate. Owing to the Seleucid monarchy's use of official languages other than Greek (for instance Aramaic and Akkadian), it has recently been portrayed as a Near Eastern rather than Greek state in a cultural as well as a geographical sense.[1] Nonetheless, the dominance of Greek forms of political organization and of the Greek language survived the defeat of the Hellenistic kingdoms by the Roman Republic in the second and first centuries BC, and lasted throughout the Roman imperial period, long after 312, when the Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity. The frontier of the empire lay along the middle and upper Euphrates, until it advanced to take in all, and then (after a defeat by the Sassanid Persians in 363) most, of northern Mesopotamia.

Of course, there is evidence of the continued use of local languages in Anatolia, of various dialects of Aramaic in Syria, and of Hebrew and Aramaic in Judaea. The Jewish community was the sole example, however, of a national tradition, embodied in Semitic-language texts, which persisted throughout the Graeco-Roman period. From the third century BC onwards, the books of the Hebrew Bible were progressively translated into Greek, making possible the extension of Christianity to Gentiles and the

[1] For this thesis, note esp. S. Sherwin-White, 'Seleucid Babylonia: A Case Study for the Installation and Development of Greek Rule', in *Hellenism in the East: The Interaction of Greek and Non-Greek Civilizations from Syria to Central Asia after Alexander*, ed. A. Kuhrt and S. Sherwin-White (Berkeley, 1987), p. 1; and more fully S. Sherwin-White and A. Kuhrt, *From Samarkhand to Sardis: A New Approach to the Seleucid Empire* (Berkeley, 1993), with a set of discussions in *Topoi*, iv (1994).

writing of Christian scriptures in Greek. The spread of Christianity in turn promoted the emergence of Christian 'languages of culture' other than Greek, for instance Coptic, Syriac, and Armenian, and of non-Greek forms of Christianity that survive to the present day.[1]

During the Classical period itself, with the exception of a few periods of Jewish independence, some long, others short – the Hasmonaean state, which freed itself from Seleucid rule step by step from the 160s to 129 BC and remained independent until 63 BC; the revolt of AD 66 to 73; and the Bar Kochba revolt of 132-5 – few non-Greek political structures were to be found west of the Euphrates during the millennium from Alexander to Muhammad (the Nabataean kingdom of the first century AD would be a partial exception). In the eyes of Graeco-Roman observers, the only local culture and religious tradition which represented anything distinctive, troubling, or worthy of comment was Judaism.[2] These two statements are true even of Egypt, despite the persistence of Egyptian temples and priests, of monumental (hieroglyphic) and cursive writing in Egyptian, and of Egyptian art and architecture (though Egypt represents too complex and individual a case in cultural history to be explained here). With few exceptions, the Graeco-Roman observer saw the Near East as Greek, marked out by a network of Greek cities, and, from the fourth century onwards, by Christian churches and bishoprics.

Anatolia remained Greek and Christian until the Turkish advances of, broadly, the eleventh century. In spite of the settlement there of a Celtic population, the 'Galatians', in the third century BC, the use of Phrygian for public inscriptions in the Roman period, and the persistence of Phrygian and Lycian architectural styles, the culture and religious history of Anatolia, even of inland areas – let alone the Greek cities along the coast – from the Hellenistic period to the Late Empire is the history of Greek culture, in both city and country.[3] The same is true, despite the visibility of the Semitic languages, to the south of Anatolia.[4]

To think, when looking at the Near East, of the Classical world and Asia as two different worlds, or of the latter as a foreign, 'Asian' world seen from the Mediterranean, is entirely to misconceive the situation. West of the Euphrates, and in some areas east of it, the Near East was a part of the Classical world. Our contemporaries who make historic claims to the Holy Land might recall that, for a thousand years, it was part of the Greek

1 For a useful survey, *Christianismes orientaux: introduction à l'étude des langues et des littératures*, ed. M. Albert (Paris, 1993).

2 See M. Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*: I-III (Jerusalem, 1974-84).

3 See the major work by S. Mitchell, *Anatolia: Land, Men, and Gods in Asia Minor*: I-II (Oxford, 1993).

4 F. Millar, *The Roman Near East, 31 BC-AD 337* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993).

world, for seven hundred years was ruled by Rome, and for three hundred years was part of a Christian Greek world.

When we look beyond the Euphrates, the historical framework is profoundly different: Classical writers offer representation of societies there which were in various ways 'foreign' and 'oriental'. Alexander's conquests, which marked out the area which the Classical world knew and had continuing contact with, extended to regions characterized by different language-groups, social structures, religious systems, and cultures. First was Mesopotamia, particularly the southern part, Babylonia, heir to a long cultural tradition, persisting under successive empires. Writing in Akkadian, using the cuneiform writing-system developed from the late fourth millennium, persisted throughout the Hellenistic period into the first century AD; the latest cuneiform tablet so far known dates to AD 74-5, and is thus contemporary with Vespasian.[1] Second, further east, was the vast Iranian plateau, the culture of which is immensely difficult to characterize; it remains empty space on the map of the cultures of Asia. Third, beyond Iran was the region Classical writers called 'Arachosia' and 'Bactria', roughly modern Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, in which scattered evidence reveals a powerful imprint of Greek imperialism and colonialism. Finally, there was India (primarily the Indus Valley, now in Pakistan), which attracted more attention and stimulated more ethnographic – or pseudo-ethnographic – writing in Greek and Latin than the other three regions combined: Herodotus and other Greek writers had spoken of India even before Alexander's expedition. The high profile of India was partly the legacy of the detailed accounts left by writers of Alexander's time and of the early Hellenistic period; and was partly explained by the existence under the Roman Empire of well-established trade routes from the Mediterranean to India, by sea from Egypt, or by a combination of land and sea through Mesopotamia. The sight of a ship setting sail for India had made Trajan think longingly of following in the footsteps of Alexander.

* * *

A survey of the relations between the Greek and Roman world and this series of regions should begin by recalling that Alexander had travelled south across the Fertile Crescent to Babylonia, Susa, and Persis, then north and north-east to Media and Bactria, and then south again to the Indus Valley. With what conceptions, and with what long-term goals (if any) Alexander and his forces had approached the cultures and societies they encountered, it is hardly possible now to know. It may not be an

1 See J. Oelsner, *Materialien zur babylonischen Gesellschaft und Kultur in hellenistischer Zeit* (Budapest, 1986), p. 54.

accident, however, that the clearest and most emphatic *attribution* of a motive to Alexander in Classical literature comes from centuries later, and dates to precisely the period of Trajan's campaigns in the East. At that time, Plutarch wrote his *On the Fortune of Alexander*, in which he portrayed Alexander as bearing the benefits of Greek civilization to the barbarians:

> But if you examine the results of Alexander's instruction, you will see that he educated the Hyrcanians to respect the marriage bond and taught the Arachosians to till the soil, and persuaded the Sogdians to support their parents, not to kill them, and the Persians to respect their mothers and not to marry them ... When Alexander was civilising Asia, Homer was commonly read, and the children of the Persians, of the Susianians and of the Gedrosians learnt to chant the tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides ... Thus Alexander's new subjects would not have been civilised, had they not been vanquished. Egypt would not have its Alexandria, nor Mesopotamia its Seleucia, nor Sogdiana its Prophthasia, nor India Boukephalia, nor the Caucasus [the Hindu Kush] a Greek city near it.[1]

There is no doubt that Alexander, and later the Seleucids, did found Greek cities in Asia, though predominantly in Syria, Mesopotamia, and Bactria.[2] Those that can be identified in the Iranian plateau are located along the north-eastern edge, like Laodicea in Media; in the north; between the Zagros mountains and Mesopotamia proper, like Seleucia on the Eulaeus, the ancient Susa; or (probably) on the Persian Gulf, like Antiochia in Persis. The plateau itself, in this respect as in so many others, remains largely a blank. Plutarch's idealizing conception that a 'civilising mission' had characterized Alexander's campaign and that Greek culture and social norms had been communicated to a variety of Asian societies should not be allowed to colour our analysis of his actions.[3] Nonetheless, even Plutarch, though imperialist in his belief in the superiority of Greek *culture*, does not speak in racialist terms. Greek writing on Asia is not marked by particular attention to physical type or skin colour, or by the attribution of inherent racial characteristics.

If racialism was not significant, both imperialism and colonialism were. Whatever the uncertainties in the evidence, we can be certain that a number of 'Alexandrias' and other Greek cities were founded in Central Asia,

1 Plutarch, *Moralia* 328C-F (Loeb ed., iv. 393-7).

2 For a very careful review of the complex and confusing evidence for city-foundations by Alexander himself in Asia, see P. M. Fraser, *Cities of Alexander the Great* (New York, 1996). See also G. M. Cohen, *The Seleucid Colonies: Studies in Founding, Administration, and Organization* (Wiesbaden, 1978).

3 See esp. P. Briant, 'Colonisation hellénistique et populations indigènes: la phase d'installation' in his *Rois, Tributs, et Paysans* (Paris, 1982), pp. 227ff.

from Alexandria Eschate ('the furthest') in ancient Sogdiana (Tajikistan) to 'Alexandria in Arachosia' (Kandahar). One of these Greek cities, whose ancient name is unknown, and whose remains were discovered at a site called Ai Khanum on the banks of the Amu Darya (the Oxus) in Afghanistan, was extensively excavated from 1965 until war brought work to a halt in 1978.[1] With almost too perfect an appropriateness, one of the Greek inscriptions found there contains a set of maxims copied from those set up at Delphi, five thousand kilometres to the west.[2]

The evidence hardly allows us to see what happened to these small, distant Greek cities in rapidly changing circumstances. We know that, in the last years of the fourth century BC, Seleucus I withdrew from northern India and extensive areas to its north-west ('Gedrosia' and 'Arachosia' to the Greeks) before the first king of the Mauryan dynasty, Chandragupta ('Sandrakottos' in Greek texts). In Bactria, further north-east, independent or semi-independent Greek kingdoms arose in the third century BC and continued until the second century. The scatter of small Greek inscriptions from Central Asia shows that the language remained in use (alongside Aramaic), without telling us whether it was used only by colonists, or by administrators using Greek, or whether its use had spread, as Plutarch's words suggest, widely among non-Greeks. Nothing prepares us for the official use of Greek by Chandragupta's grandson, the renowned king Aśoka (probably 265-228 BC), a convert to Buddhism, whose great series of moralizing edicts, carved on rock faces or pillars over almost all of India, from south to north, represents the earliest written evidence for the history of the subcontinent.[3] Even though we cannot know who precisely was being addressed, one is still amazed, forty years after the first of the Greek edicts was published, to read Aśoka's message as expressed in two Greek inscriptions discovered at Kandahar.

The first edict is accompanied by an Aramaic version, an important fact in itself, and reads as follows:[4]

1 Perhaps the best sketch of what is known of the site, from which the discoveries are still being studied, is P. Bernard, 'Aï Khanum on the Oxus: A Hellenistic City in Central Asia', *Proceedings of the British Academy* (1967), p. 71. For a more up-to-date survey, C. Rapin, 'Greeks in Afghanistan: Aï Khanum', in *Greek Colonists and Native Populations*, ed. J. P. Descoeudres (Oxford, 1990), p. 329.

2 See the evocative paper by L. Robert, 'De Delphes à l'Oxus: Inscriptions grecques nouvelles de la Bactriane', *Comptes-rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions* (1968), p. 416.

3 See R. Thapar, *Aśoka and the Decline of the Mauryas* (2nd ed., New York, 1997), with two maps at the end showing the distribution of the inscribed Edicts.

4 First published by D. Schlumberger, L. Robert, A. Dupont-Sommer, and E. Benveniste, 'Une bilingue gréco-araméenne d'Asoka', *Journal Asiatique*, ccxlvi (1958), 1; text reproduced in *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum*: XX (1964), no. 326, and in J. Pouilloux, *Choix d'inscriptions grecques* (Paris, 1960), no. 14, with French translation. An English translation can be found in *The Hellenistic Age: From the Battle of Ipsos to the Death of Kleopatra VII*, ed. and trans. S. M. Burstein (Cambridge, 1985), no. 50.

Now that ten years have been completed, the king Piodasses [Aśoka] has demonstrated piety to men, and from that time on has made men more pious, and everything prospers over all the land, and the king abstains from [eating] living things, and the other men, even such as are the king's hunters and fishermen, have ceased to hunt, and if any are uncontrolled they have ceased from their excess as far as they can, and [are] obedient to their fathers and mothers and their elders to a degree not seen before; and for the future, acting in accordance with all these principles they will conduct themselves in a more desirable and better way.

Less attention has been paid to the second inscription of the pair, published in 1964,[1] a remarkable text only once reproduced for study by Classical historians and none of it, in its Greek version, translated into English.[2] The text, containing the end of Edict XII of Aśoka and the beginning of Edict XIII – in which he expresses his remorse over the slaughter in the recent war in Kalinga – appears, in this case, only in Greek and has been inscribed on a building-block. As Daniel Schlumberger observes, it is an adaptation rather than a literal translation of the Indian versions which are known from elsewhere.

It may be sufficient to translate here the first few lines of Edict XIII, referring to the Kalinga war:

While Piodasses was in the eighth year of his reign, he conquered Kalinga. There were captured and deported from there 150,000 persons, and another 100,000 were killed, and almost as many others died. From that moment remorse and pity took hold of him, and he was grieved. In the same way as he ordered that men should abstain from [eating] living things, he exercises zeal and effort in the pursuit of piety [*eusebeia*]. And this the king has felt with still greater displeasure; [that?] such as dwelt there who were Bramenai or Sramenai, or also any others who spend their lives on piety ... if any of these following such a way of life has died or been deported ...

To a study of the Classical world's relationship with Asia, the edicts and minor inscriptions of Aśoka are of greater significance than might be supposed. It is striking enough to read an expression of Buddhist doctrines in Greek. With the exception of the undeciphered Indus Valley Script of the

1 E. Benveniste, 'Edicts d'Asoka en traduction grecque', *Journal Asiatique*, cclii (1964), 137; D. Schlumberger, 'Une nouvelle inscription grecque d'Açoka', *Comptes-rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions* (1964), p. 126. I have not seen D. Schlumberger, E. Benveniste, 'A New Greek Inscription of Asoka at Kandahar', *Epigraphia Indica*, xxxvii (1968), 193. French trans. in J.-M. Bertrand, *L'Hellénisme 323-31 av. J.-C.* (Paris, 1992), pp. 63-4.

2 For what seems to be the sole reprinting of the Greek text, see R. Schmitt, 'EX OCCIDENTE LUX. Griechen und griechische Sprache im hellenistischen Fernen Osten', in *Beiträge zur hellenistischen Literatur und ihrer Rezeption in Rom*, ed. P. Steinmetz (Stuttgart, 1990), pp. 47-9, with German translation. Although an English translation of the relevant Edicts (XII and XIII), derived from various versions in Prakrit, is provided in Thapar, *Aśoka*, pp. 255-6 n. 26, this part of the book is a reprint of the original 1961 text, and the translation therefore does not depend on the Greek version.

third and early second millennium, the inscriptions of Aśoka are, in fact, the earliest written documents from the Indian subcontinent. Apart from Greek and Aramaic, the edicts were written in a set of dialects related to Sanskrit, and called Prakrit; the balance of scholarly opinion is that the two scripts used for the Prakrit versions, namely Kharosthi (confined to the north-west, and always written right to left) and Brahmi (normally written left to right), both derived from Aramaic.[1] Thus, both the languages and scripts used by Aśoka suggest that monumental writing in India owed its origins to the influence of the Achaemenid empire, in which Aramaic was widely used as an official language, and of the Seleucid empire, in which Aramaic was still used alongside the primary language, Greek.

Elsewhere in his edicts (in the so-called Fifth Major Rock Edict), Aśoka does indeed list Greeks as being among the peoples of his empire, and he also refers to 'the Greek king named Antiochus' (Antiochus II, 261-246 BC). It is unfortunate that the Greek text of Edict XIII breaks off where it does, for here, according to the Prakrit versions, Aśoka goes on to refer again to Antiochus, and also to other Hellenistic kings: 'and beyond the realm of that Antiochus, in the lands of the four kings named Ptolemy, Antigonus, Magas and Alexander ... '.[2]

No hint of interaction between Greek thought and Buddhism appears in any pagan Classical source, and, in the surviving Greek literature, the earliest mention of the Buddha by name is by the Christian writer Clement of Alexandria at the end of the second century.[3] Classical narratives of the history of the Greek successor-states which replaced the Seleucids in the Bactrian area, and lasted into the second century BC, are also very slight. It is not worth summarizing here the complex and uncertain sequences of rulers and dynasties which can be worked out, primarily from their exceptionally beautiful and impressive coins with Greek legends.[4] Polybius' narrative of Hellenistic history, fragmentary as it is, does touch on this

1 See R. G. Salomon, 'Brahmi and Kharosthi', in *The World's Writing Systems*, ed. P. T. Daniels and W. Bright (New York, 1996), p. 373.

2 Thapar, *Aśoka*, pp. 255-6 n. 26. The kings are Ptolemy II Philadelphus (285-242 BC), Antigonus Gonatas (276-239 BC), Magas of Cyrene (dates not quite certain), and (probably) Alexander of Epirus (272-255 BC).

3 Clement, *Stromata* i. 71, 6: 'There are among the Indians those who believe in the teachings of Boutta, whom because of his exceptional nobility they have honoured as a god.' See A. Dihle, 'Indische Philosophen bei Clemens Alexandrinus', in his *Antike und Orient: Gesammelte Aufsätze* (Heidelberg, 1984), p. 78, and G. M. Bongard-Levin and S. Karpyuk, 'Nachricheten über den Buddhismus in der antiken und frühchristlichen Literatur', in *Hellenismus: Beiträge zur Erforschung von Akkulturation und politischer Ordnung in den Staaten des hellenistischen Zeitalters*, ed. B. Funck (Tübingen, 1996), p. 701.

4 See esp. the classic work of W. W. Tarn, *The Greeks in Bactria and India* (3rd ed., Cambridge, 1985), with preface and bibliography by F. L. Holt; A. K. Narain, *The Indo-Greeks* (Oxford, 1957). For a fine selection of these royal coins, see N. Davis and C. M. Kraay, *The Hellenistic Kingdoms: Portrait Coins and History* (London, 1973), ch. 5.

area, however, in connection with the march into Central Asia by the Seleucid king Antiochus III, 'the Great', in the last years of the third century BC. Polybius represents one of the local Greek kings, Euthydemus, as defending his usurpation of power on the grounds that Seleucid control of the region had broken down earlier, and that threats by nomad invaders meant that if the area were not defended it would soon be 'barbarised' (ekbarbarōthēsesthai).[1]

Greek rule in Bactria did disappear, though not as immediately as Euthydemus feared. One of the most striking revelations of recent years is the publication of the first perishable document discovered in a Greek kingdom in Bactria, a Greek parchment, apparently of the first half of the second century BC. The text, fragmentary as it is, reflects a fully Hellenized regime:[2]

> In the joint reign of the God Antimachus and of Eumenes and Antimachus ... year 4, month Olous, in Asangorna when [...] was guardian of the law [*nomophylax*], Menodotus the tax-gatherer [*logeutēs*] ...

Later in the century, Bactria was conquered by the Sakas or Shakas, whose kings continued to use Greek titles and Greek coin-legends. In the meantime, however, Greek rulers, who naturally continued to use Greek on their coinage, had extended their control south of the Hindu Kush mountains to the northern part of the Indian subcontinent. It was only in the first century AD that both this area and Bactria fell under the rule of the Kushans, who also initially used Greek for their coin-legends.[3] John Boardman's study of the diffusion of Greek art shows how profound its influence still was, for instance on 'Gandharan' sculpture and on the earliest sculptural representations of the Buddha, which date to the first century AD.[4] Perhaps the most striking item is the coin of the Kushan king Kanishka, probably dating to the early second century AD, which bears a representation of the Buddha on the reverse, accompanied by the Greek legend BOΔΔO.[5]

The reign of Kanishka offers some of the most remarkable of all the

1 Polybius xi. 39 (Loeb ed., iv. 301-3).

2 Published independently by J. R. Rea, A. S. Hollis, and R. C. Senior, 'A Tax Receipt from Hellenistic Bactria', *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, civ (1944), 261, and by P. Bernard and C. Rapin, 'Un parchemin gréco-bactrien d'une collection privée', *Comptes-rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions* (1994), p. 261. See C. Rapin, 'Nouvelles observations sur le parchemin gréco-bactrien d'Asangôrna', *Topoi*, vi (1996), 458.

3 For an illuminating survey, with extensive illustrations, see *The Crossroads of Asia: Transformation of Image and Symbol in the Art of Ancient Afghanistan and Pakistan*, ed. E. Errington and J. Cribb (Cambridge, 1992).

4 J. Boardman, *The Diffusion of Classical Art in Antiquity* (Princeton, 1994), ch. 4.

5 Ibid., p. 123 (coin reproduced on p. 124); *Transformation of Image*, ed. Errington and Cribb, pp. 199-200 n. 36.

evidence for the profound and long-lasting influence of Greek in Afghanistan and northern India. His coins show a transition from the use of royal titles in Greek to ones in an Iranian language conventionally labelled 'Bactrian'. But the script used continues to be Greek, with the addition of one letter, shaped somewhat like a Greek 'rho', but with the vertical stroke continued upwards, which was used for the sound 'sh'. The truly remarkable new find is an extensive inscription of the first year of Kanishka's reign, found in 1993 at Rabatak in Afghanistan, and written in Bactrian using this version of the Greek alphabet. The text, proclaiming the king's assumption of power, with divine favour, and recounting the cities in northern India which he ruled, records explicitly that 'Kanishka the Kushan' [*Kanēshke koshano*] 'issued a Greek edict and [then] put it into Aryan'. A substantial group of Bactrian documents, one written on copper and the others on perishable materials, dating to the fourth to eighth centuries, and still using a cursive variant of the same (more or less) Greek alphabet, awaits publication.[1] The edict is evidence of the length of both Greek and Iranian influence in the region. Perhaps only the great inscription of the second Sassanid king, Shapur I (r. AD 240-7), surpasses it as testimony to the long-lasting importance of Alexander.

* * *

As we have reached the period when both a well-established sea route and a land-sea route linked the Mediterranean with India, it is time to turn back to examine the (paradoxically) less well attested, and more mysterious, relations of the Graeco-Roman world with Iran. The area is geographically closer to the Mediterranean, and its successive rulers either were (for a time) themselves Greek, during the first part of the Hellenistic period, or alternatively were in close contact, and often conflict, with the Graeco-Roman powers, as was the case with Achaemenid Persia, Parthia, and Sassanid Persia. The mystery arises out of the lack of contemporary evidence in any Iranian language. This is true of the Achaemenid Persian empire, from which the only strictly Persian documents are royal inscriptions in Old Persian, written in cuneiform, as were Achaemenid documents in Elamite or Akkadian. Whether there was also an alphabetic (or any other) system for writing Old Persian on perishable materials is a matter of speculation; the thousands of administrative documents known from Persepolis are written mainly in Elamite, but also in Aramaic.

[1] N. Sims-Williams and J. Cribb, 'A New Bactrian Inscription of Kanishka the Great', *Journal of the Institute of Silk Road Studies*, iv (1995-6), 75; N. Sims-Williams, 'Nouveaux documents sur l'histoire et la langue de la Bactriane', *Comptes-rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions* (1996), p. 633 (also reporting on the later documents).

There is an equal silence from the period of Hellenistic control of Iran, and an almost equally complete one from the Parthian period. It was of great political and strategic significance that a little-known Iranian people, the Parthians, replaced the Seleucids in Iran in the early second century BC, and extended their empire to Babylonia and the middle Euphrates later in the century. The Parthian empire was to be the main adversary of the Romans in the Near East; Trajan had marched against them on the campaign which took him to the Persian Gulf. Although there is some documentation written on perishable materials or on fragments of pottery, and some coin-legends, to show that Parthian, an Iranian language, could be written using the Aramaic alphabet,[1] not a single item of literature in an Iranian language survives from the Parthian period, which lasted for more than four centuries until the 220s AD, when the Parthian kings were replaced by a new Persian dynasty originating from Fars (Persis) in the south of Iran, the Sassanids.

The Parthians ruled over much the same area as the Seleucids, except that they never conquered Syria, and within their territories Aramaic was widely used, as it had been under the Achaemenids and the Seleucids. Akkadian survived in Babylonia at least until towards the end of the first century AD, and Greek cities, deriving from early-Hellenistic colonization, like Seleucia on the Tigris and Seleucia on the Eulaeus – the ancient Persian city of Susa in Elymais (Elam) – flourished in the Parthian empire. There was also the (now) famous small Hellenistic settlement of Dura-Europos on the Euphrates, which was excavated, if not exactly by, at any rate under the direction of, Franz Cumont and Mikhail Rostovtzeff in the 1920s and 1930s. Thus, the Parthian empire was a multicultural, or multi-ethnic, world in which the culture least visible to us was that of the Parthians themselves. Although the original documentation surviving from the region in this period is scanty, a significant amount of what there is was written in Greek. In other words, the Parthian empire was, in one respect, just another late-Hellenistic kingdom.

Take, for instance, the two long Greek parchments of the first century BC (88-87 and 22-21 respectively), whose origin E. H. Minns, when publishing them in 1915, describes in terms which now seem striking: 'Avroman is a town in Persian Kurdistan lying close to the Turkish Frontier.'[2] In fact, the place of origin lies in the foothills of the Zagros, north-

1 See P. V. Skjaervo, 'Aramaic Scripts for Iranian Languages', in *World's Writing Systems*, ed. Daniels and Bright, p. 515 n. 30. The largest group of Parthian texts is represented by over 2,000 *ostraca* from Nisa in Turkmenistan; see I. M. Diakonoff and V. A. Livshits, *Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum*: II. 2: *Parthian Economic Documents from Nisa*, I-III, ed. D. N. Mackenzie (London, 1976-7).

2 E. H. Minns, 'Parchments of the Parthian Period from Avroman in Kurdistan', *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, xxxv (1915), 22. It seems extraordinary that these two extensive Greek documents, along with

north-east of Baghdad, in present-day Iraq. The dating of the earlier of the two parchments perfectly reflects the character both of the Parthian kings as late-Hellenistic monarchs and of the power-relations of the time:

> In the reign of the King of Kings, Arsaces, benefactor, just, manifest, philhellene, and of the Queens, Siace his compaternal sister and wife and Aryazate surnamed Automa, daughter of the great King Tigranes [of Armenia] and his wife ...

Next, one might cite the inscription of AD 21 containing a letter in Greek from the Parthian king, Artabanus III, addressed to the city of Susa on the Eulaeus;[1] or perhaps more indicative, a series of nine business and legal documents written in Greek on parchment, found in Dura-Europos and dating from the last eighty years of Parthian rule, before the Roman advance of the 160s.[2] Although Dura-Europos was a Greek settlement, this evidence for the conduct of public legal business there in Greek nonetheless reveals the workings of the Parthian empire. Equally striking in a different way is the bilingual text from the mid-second century AD inscribed on a statue of Herakles to record that the Parthian king Vologaeses IV had taken it as part of the spoils when he captured Mesene at the head of the Persian Gulf and brought it back to Seleucia on the Tigris. The Greek text is accompanied by one in Parthian, written as always in Aramaic letters.[3]

Although Greek was a normal and established language for public documents in the Parthian empire, the Iranian languages – first Parthian, then Persian proper, then others (apart from 'Bactrian', which used Greek letters) – borrowed from Aramaic, the alphabet which they were to use for written texts. This complex evolution is dramatically illustrated by the earliest document of the Sassanid Persian empire, which replaced the Parthian empire in the 220s. Shapur I left at Naqsh-i Rustam near Persepolis in southern Iran a long public record of his military and civil achievements, inscribed in Greek, Parthian, and Middle Persian, the latter two again using the Aramaic alphabet written from right to left.[4] The vast Greek text in which Shapur describes his wars against Rome in the 240s

---

one in Parthian, now in the British Museum, have never been restudied in detail since.

1 C. B. Welles, *Royal Correspondence in the Hellenistic Period* (New Haven, 1934), no. 75.

2 H. M. Cotton, W. E. H. Cockle, F. G. B. Millar, 'The Papyrology of the Roman Near East: A Survey', *Journal of Roman Studies*, lxxxv (1995), 214, nos. 34, 36-43.

3 Greek text in *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum*: XXXVII (1987), no. 1403. See esp. P. Bernard, 'Vicissitudes au gré de l'histoire d'une statue en bronze d'Héraclès entre Séleucie du Tigre et la Mésène', *Journal des Savants* (1990), p. 3.

4 For the best account, see A. Maricq, 'Res Gestae Divi Saporis', *Syria*, xxxv (1958), 295. See the invaluable examples of the Parthian and Middle Persian scripts used in this inscription which are provided by Skjaervo, 'Aramaic Scripts', pp. 522-3 n. 40. An English translation is given in R. N. Frye, *The History of Ancient Iran* (Munich, 1984), pp. 371-3.

and 250s and explains the principles of his civil government may be regarded as the ultimate testimony to the long-lasting legacy of Alexander's conquests six hundred years earlier.

The late borrowing of an alphabetic script for writing Persian is of crucial importance, as is the fact that for the whole of the Sassanid period, which lasted until the Islamic conquests of the seventh century, we have no contemporary manuscripts of works written in Persian or other Iranian languages, except for Manichaean manuscripts from Central Asia.[1] There are literary works of the Islamic period which are written in Persian, and which are claimed to have been compiled in the Sassanid period, or to be based on works of that period, but there are no actual manuscripts. We might contrast with this silence the long list of ancient papyri with texts, fragmentary or extensive, of Greek (and some Latin) literary works, or the striking series of dated Syriac manuscripts, beginning with one written in Edessa in AD 411, now in the British Museum.[2] From Iran there is nothing comparable.

Out of this silence emerges the most remarkable case of the construction, or representation, of an 'oriental' religious system by Greek, and later also Roman, writers: Zoroastrianism. It is not claimed here that we can *know* that the conventional account of Zoroaster, of his teaching, and of its diffusion in Iran is a fiction; only that, so far as evidence from Antiquity is concerned, our (supposed) knowledge of Zoroastrianism depends entirely, and without exception, on Graeco-Roman representations. However, this view is not conceded in the standard works of reference. P. V. Skjaervo, speaking of the central text of medieval and modern Zoroastrianism, the *Avesta*, remarks: 'The oldest Avestan texts are approximately contemporary with the *Rigveda* [second millennium BCE], while the younger texts date from the first millennium BCE; they were transmitted orally and written down only in the mid-Sasanian period, the fifth-sixth centuries CE (though the oldest manuscripts date only from the 13th century).'[3]

The history of Zoroaster is, in fact, derived solely from claims made within these texts themselves; the earliest references to Zoroaster contained in texts in Iranian languages are found in Manichaean writings discovered in Central Asia. It is exceedingly difficult to date these manuscripts, or the works which they contain, but none can be earlier than the lifetime of Mani

1 See the careful study of the evidence by J. Wiesehöfer, *Das antiken Persien von 550 v. Chr. bis 650 n. Chr.* (Zurich, 1994), pp. 366-8 (a survey of the epigraphic and literary evidence for the Sassanid period); English translation by A. Azodi, *Ancient Persia from 550 to 650 AD* (London, 1996), pp. 283-5.

2 See W. H. P. Hatch, *Album of Dated Syriac Manuscripts* (Cambridge, Mass., 1946), which could now be substantially updated.

3 Skjaervo, 'Aramaic Scripts', p. 257.

himself, the third century AD, and most must be much later.[1] The specifically Zoroastrian texts comprise a set of religious writings of the Islamic period which project the figure of Zoroaster, and the story of the *Avesta* as a text, back into the remote past.

The *ancient* evidence for Zoroaster, his date, and his teachings is all, without exception, Graeco-Roman. It begins with Xanthos the Lydian in the late fifth century BC, who claimed that Zoroaster lived six thousand years before Xerxes invaded Greece, and continues throughout the Classical period.[2] Classical sources provide by far the earliest representations of Zoroaster as an Iranian sage located in the remote past, whose teachings expressed a dualistic view of the world. The most informative of these texts is a passage from Plutarch's essay *On Isis and Osiris*, a work written in the early second century AD:[3]

> The great majority and the wisest of men hold this opinion: they believe that there are two gods, rivals as it were, the one the Artificer of good and the other of evil. There are also those who call the better one a god and the other a daemon, as, for example, Zoroaster the sage, who, they record, lived five thousand years before the time of the Trojan War. He called the one Oromazes and the other Areimanius; and he further declared that among all things perceptible to the senses Oromazes may best be compared to light, and Areimanius, conversely, to darkness and ignorance, and midway between the two is Mithras; for this reason the Persian give to Mithras the name of 'Mediator'.

The conclusion is obvious. No problem arises from Plutarch's reference to the major Iranian deity, Ahura Mazda, for the great inscription of Darius I, from the late sixth century BC, proclaims the king as his worshipper. Neither in this long inscription, however, nor anywhere else in the scanty Iranian evidence from before the early medieval period, is any allusion made to an ancient teacher named Zoroaster.

The reader might reasonably object that the manuscripts of Plutarch's works, too, are medieval. So they are. The fundamental difference, however, is that the texts of Classical authors such as Plutarch, while mainly derived from medieval manuscripts, can be tied into a dense interlocking network of ancient papyrus texts and of ancient documents, both papyri and inscriptions, some naming Plutarch himself, as well as many other

1 For these texts in English translation, see H.-J. Klimkeit, *Gnosis on the Silk Road: Gnostic Texts from Central Asia* (San Francisco, 1993). Note, e.g., the 'Zarathustra Fragment' (p. 47), and the allusion to Zarathustra in a poem in Parthian on p. 125. No date is suggested for either text or either manuscript.

2 The texts are conveniently collected and discussed by J. Bidez and F. Cumont, *Les mages hellénisés*: I-II (Paris, 1938). See now Albert de Jong, *Traditions of the Magi: Zoroastrianism in Greek and Latin Literature* (New York, 1997). Note also P. Kingsley, 'The Greek Origin of the Sixth-Century Dating of Zoroaster', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, liii (1990), 245, vigorously criticizing the Greek tradition – but only (it seems) in favour of a second-millennium date for the 'real' Zoroaster.

3 Plutarch, *Moralia* 369D-370D (Loeb ed., v. 111-13).

persons who appear in his *Lives* and *Moral Essays*. In this case, therefore, we can work back from the medieval copy to a known ancient context. With the *Avesta*, we cannot. A series of Classical writers ascribe to a very ancient Persian sage named 'Zoroaster' a dualistic view of the world. We cannot prove them wrong, but it would be counter to all methodological principles to treat such representations as fact. Even in the Classical world, not everybody accepted this branch of oriental wisdom without question. Very few, however, showed the scepticism expressed by the great neo-Platonic philosopher Porphyry in the third century AD, in his Life of Plotinus: 'I, Porphyry, wrote a considerable number of refutations of the books of Zoroaster, which I showed to be entirely spurious and modern, made up by the sectarians to convey the impression that the doctrines which they had chosen to hold in honour were those of the ancient Zoroaster.'[1]

Thus, we cannot continue to write the history of 'Zoroastrianism', from remote Antiquity onwards, on the basis of projections or representations evolved by writers from within the Classical world. That is to accept an ancient version of 'orientalism' and to absorb it into a modern one.

In the ancient world, as in the modern, Asia functioned as a free-fire zone for the European imagination. Disparagement was not always the result. On the contrary, the imaginations of intellectuals in the Classical world were repeatedly fired by visions of different forms of oriental culture and wisdom (some of them justified, like the antiquity of Egyptian civilization, or the derivation of the Greek alphabet from the Phoenician). In Classical representations of oriental wise men, Persian Magi, 'Chaldean' or Babylonian astrologers, and Indian Brahmins or 'naked sophists' could all play a part.[2] One writer who repeatedly draws on non-Greek, and in particular oriental, sources of wisdom is Porphyry, though he was often sceptical. Some modern scholars take Porphyry himself to be 'oriental', on the grounds that he came from Tyre in Phoenicia. There is no evidence, however, that he knew any language other than Greek (and no doubt Latin), whether Syriac, Aramaic, Hebrew, Egyptian, Akkadian, or Persian, or that he had, or could have had, personal knowledge of writings in any of these languages. His view of non-Greek sources of wisdom was formed from images already current within Greek culture.[3]

If we postulate Babylonia as a source of 'oriental' learning, however, we

1 Porphyry, *Vita Plotini* 16 (Loeb ed., i. 45).

2 Note the monograph by A. Momigliano, *Alien Wisdom: The Limits of Hellenization* (Cambridge, 1976), stressing the limits – above all the linguistic limits – of the real knowledge of other cultures which the Greeks of the Hellenistic period acquired. See also Dihle, 'Indische Philosophen'.

3 See F. Millar, 'Porphyry: Ethnicity, Language, and Alien Wisdom', in *Philosophia Togata*: II: *Plato and Aristotle at Rome*, ed. J. Barnes and M. Griffin (Oxford, 1996), p. 241.

are faced with an unresolved puzzle. Documentary evidence shows that for at least four centuries after Alexander's conquest, Greek, Akkadian (still written in cuneiform, though occasionally transliterated into Greek), and also Aramaic were in use there. But was there any continuing intellectual exchange, at the level of literature or learning, between the various cultures? There is as yet no way of answering this question.[1]

Paradoxical as it may seem, a more powerful image of India, than of either Iran or Babylonia, is found in the literature of the Classical world.[2] India, above all, attracted the attention of the writers who accompanied Alexander. The most influential was Megasthenes, in the entourage of Alexander's satrap of Arachosia and Gedrosia, roughly southern Afghanistan and Baluchistan, who went on one or more embassies to the Mauryan emperor Chandragupta, probably (as it now seems) at an early stage in his rise to power.[3] Megasthenes' work does not survive in the original, but was extensively used by later writers: Diodorus in the late Republic; Strabo the geographer in the reign of Augustus; Pliny the Elder in the seventies of the first century AD; and, above all, in the *Indica* of Arrian in the second century AD. The *Indica*, which is attached to Arrian's account of Alexander's campaigns, is the fullest Classical account of India which we have; but it was written four-and-a-half centuries after the event and not long after Trajan's Parthian campaign.[4] Thus, though a considerable quantity of writing about India exists in the Classical sources, duly reporting, for instance, on the caste-system and the importance of Brahmins, we cannot be certain that the knowledge gained with Alexander was refreshed by continuing observation in the centuries following his death.

There may have been significant exchanges between the Classical world and India at the level of culture, myth, philosophical teaching, and religious belief; but it is difficult to separate fact from fantasy.[5] In the case of

1 Note, however, the suggestions in S. Dalley and A. T. Reyes, 'Mesopotamian Contact and Influence in the Greek World: Persia, Alexander and Rome', in *The Legacy of Mesopotamia*, ed. S. Dalley (Oxford, 1998). For the specific evidence of cuneiform texts provided with Greek transliterations, and the possible wider implications of these texts for cultural history, see M. J. Geller, 'The Last Wedge', *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie*, lxxxvii (1997), 43.

2 For discussions of the Greek and Latin texts relating to India, see, e.g., A. Dihle, 'The Conception of India in Hellenistic and Roman Literature', *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society*: X (1964), p. 15, reprinted with additions in his *Antike und Orient* (Heidelberg, 1984), p. 89: I thank Grant Parker for drawing my attention to this article; K. Karttunen, *India in Early Greek Literature* (Helsinki, 1989); N. H. H. Sitwell, *The World the Romans Knew* (London, 1984), ch. 7; J. S. Romm, *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought: Geography, Exploration, and Fiction* (Princeton, 1992), ch. 3.

3 See A. B. Bosworth, 'The Historical Setting of Megasthenes' *Indica*', *Classical Philology*, xci (1996), 113.

4 The most accessible edition of Arrian's work on Alexander, and the *Indica*, is the excellent two-volume Loeb text and translation by P. A. Brunt (Cambridge, Mass., 1976-83).

5 For a full exploration of all the possibilities without, however, much critical caution, see J. W. Sedlar, *India and the Greek World: A Study in the Transmission of Culture* (Totowa, 1980). For a more sober,

Babylonia, fantasy, or the projection of stereotypes onto an imagined exotic foreign setting, is precisely what we encounter in the remains of a novel of the second century AD by Iamblichus, called *Babyloniaca*.[1] Similarly, a representation of a Greek holy man's confrontation with exotic foreign cultures is to be found in Philostratus' historical novel written in the early third century, the *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, whose hero at one stage journeys through Babylonia to India, before returning to visit Ethiopia and Egypt.[2] As long as the cultural history of Babylonia in the later centuries BC and the early centuries AD remains to be written, we shall not be able to assess its relationship to Classical culture.

Trade between the Mediterranean and Asia in the centuries after Alexander might have been expected to have revised Classical stereotypes by supplying real knowledge about Asian states and cultures. So it did, but only in limited and unexpected ways. First, there is no real evidence of an established Ancient 'Silk Road' running across Iran to western China. The idea that the 'Silk Road' existed in the Classical period is extraordinarily persistent: the papers from an international conference on 'Palmyra and the Silk Road', held in 1992, have recently been published.[3] Michal Gawlikowski shows clearly, however, both elsewhere and in this book itself, that the extensive Palmyrene evidence for trade with the East presents it travelling across Babylonia to the Persian Gulf and then by sea to the region known as 'Scythia' (approximately modern Pakistan). No evidence exists showing the Palmyrenes venturing north-eastwards from Babylonia, to traverse Iran and Central Asia.[4]

Nor, to summarize an argument developed in more detail elsewhere,[5] does any other Classical evidence point to an established Central Asian trade route. One Greek work of the early first century AD has been thought to do so: the *Parthian Stations* of Isidorus of Charax, which the only available English edition and translation describes in its subtitle as 'an account

---

methodologically aware, approach, see Romm, *Edges of the Earth*, n. 55.

1 For a translation of Iamblichus, *A Babylonian Story* (which survives only in epitome), by G. N. Sandy, see *Collected Ancient Greek Novels*, ed. B. P. Reardon (Berkeley, 1989), p. 783.

2 For a translation, see the Loeb ed., ed. F. C. Conybeare: I-II (Cambridge, Mass., 1912). For an analysis of the work as a fictional representation of a pagan holy man, in which travel, both within the Greek world and outside it, is essential, see J. Elsner, 'Hagiographic Geography: Travel and Allegory in the *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*', *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, cxvii (1997), 22.

3 *Palmyra and the Silk Road*, published as a special issue of *Annales Archéologiques Arabes Syriennes*, xlii (1996).

4 M. Gawlikowski, 'Palmyra as a Trading Centre', *Iraq*, lvi (1994), 27; 'Palmyra and Its Caravan Trade', *Annales Archéologiques Arabes Syriennes*, xlii (1996), 139.

5 F. Millar, 'Caravan Cities: The Roman Near East and Long-Distance Trade by Land', in *Modus Operandi: Essays in Honour of Geoffrey Rickman*, ed. M. Austin, J. Harries, and C. Smith (*Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, London, supp. 71, 1998), p. 119.

of the overland *trade route* between the Levant and India'.[1] In fact, this short text is a description of the main official and military route through the Parthian empire, starting from the crossing of the Euphrates at Zeugma (at the time the accepted boundary between the Roman and Parthian empires) and continuing south-east to Babylonia, north-east across Iran, then south-east again, to end at 'Alexandropolis, the metropolis of Arachosia' (Kandahar): 'so far stretches the dominion [*epikrateia*] of the Parthians'. A traveller who continued on his journey would have arrived, as the subtitle of the English edition implies, in India, or rather modern Pakistan, not at the borders of China, which lie more than 1,000 kilometres north-east of Kandahar, beyond the Hindu Kush and the Pamirs. Thus, the historical existence of an established 'Silk Road' in the centuries between Alexander and Shapur I remains an open question.

Since, by contrast, we can be certain that trade did cross Syria, go down the Euphrates to Babylonia and the Persian Gulf, and continue by sea to India, it may seem all the more surprising that we understand so little of Babylonia in the last centuries BC and the first centuries AD, either from reasonably well-informed Classical sources, or from local evidence. If political circumstances ever allow the continuation of archaeological and documentary work in Iraq, a study of the region from Alexander to Muhammad would be of exceptional interest, both for the clash of cultures (Akkadian, Iranian, Aramaic, Graeco-Roman) and for religious history. Christianity was certainly established in Babylonia by the end of the second century, and it was from an Aramaic-speaking region of southern Babylonia that Mani, 'the apostle of Jesus Christ', arose to preach his heretical, dualistic version of Christianity in the third century AD. Although the Roman emperors, Diocletian and Maximian, denounced Manichaeism as 'arising from the Persian race which is hostile to us', the context and setting of Mani's early preaching was not Iranian at all, but Aramaic.[2] Moreover, the long-established Jewish community of Babylonia produced, in the fifth century AD, 'the' Talmud, written in Aramaic, which has shaped Judaism ever since.[3] It represents by far the largest body of evidence for the Aramaic of Babylonia.

As it is, the history of Babylonia from Alexander the Great to Muhammad remains to be written, as does the history of Iran. If we are seeking

1 W. H. Schoff, *Parthian Stations by Isidore of Charax: An Account of the Overland Trade Route between the Levant and India in the First Century BC: The Greek Text with a Translation and Commentary* (Philadelphia, 1914).

2 See P. Brown, 'The Diffusion of Manichaeism in the Roman Empire', *Journal of Roman Studies*, lix (1969), 92; S. N. C. Lieu, *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire and Medieval China* (2nd ed., Tübingen, 1992) and *Manichaeism in Central Asia and China* (New York, 1998).

3 For the Babylonian Talmud in relation to its geographical and social environment, see A. Oppenheimer, *Babylonia Judaica in the Talmudic Period* (Wiesbaden, 1983).

concrete relationships between the Classical world and Asia, we find them only in the early Roman Empire of the first century AD, and primarily with India. Reports of embassies arriving from India to see Augustus, or of one from Taprobane (Sri Lanka) coming to see Claudius, do not tell us much.[1] Real information is supplied by one of the most interesting of all texts relating to the social and economic history of the Ancient World, the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* or *Voyage round the Red Sea*, written in Greek between AD 40 and 70.[2] The 'Red Sea' ('Eruthra Thalassa' in Greek) in this context means the Indian Ocean, not only the branch of it which we call the Red Sea. The work, brilliantly edited and translated by Lionel Casson, is a guide to trade routes starting from the east coast of Egypt and going both down the East African coast and also eastwards, past the mouth of the Persian Gulf, to the region for which the anonymous author (like the Palmyrene inscriptions) uses the term 'Scythia', and then all the way down the west coast of India to the ports of Muziris and Nelkynda. 'Scythia' is marked, according to the author, by the great river Sinthus (the Indus) flowing out to the sea. The main port is described as having a Greek name, 'Barbarikon'; among the goods traded there were Chinese pelts (*Sirika dermata*). Further south lay another port, Barygaza (modern Broach), and the *Periplus* gives a revealing account of political relations in its hinterland (ch. 47, trans. Casson):

> Inland behind Barygaza there are numerous peoples: the Aratrioi, Arachusioi, Gandaraioi, and the peoples of Proklais, in whose area Bukephalos Alexandreia is located. And beyond these there is a very warlike people, the Bactrians [Kushans] under a king ... Alexander, setting out from these parts, penetrated as far as the Ganges [a widespread myth] but did not get to Limyrike and the south of India. Because of this, there are to be found on the market in Barygaza even to-day old drachmas engraved with the inscriptions, in Greek letters, of Apollodotus and Menander, rulers who came after Alexander.

Extensive archaeological discoveries of Roman pottery and coins amply confirm the reality of trade from the Roman Empire to India.[3] But the

1 For embassies from India, see Augustus' own report on his *Res Gestae* 31: 'To me embassies on behalf of kings were often sent from India, never previously witnessed before any Roman *dux*,' and the description by Nicolaus of Damascus, quoted in Strabo's *Geography* xv. 1, 73, 719 (Loeb ed., vii. 125-7), of an Indian embassy at Antioch on its way to see the emperor. For the embassy from Sri Lanka, see Pliny, *Naturalis Historia* vi. 22-4/84-91 (Loeb ed., ii. 401-9).

2 L. Casson, *The Periplus Maris Erythraei: Text with Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Princeton, 1989). For the interrelated questions of the date of the *Periplus* and of the political circumstances in the Indian subcontinent to which it alludes, see J. Cribb, 'Numismatic Evidence for the Date of the "Periplus"', in *Indian Numismatics, History, Art, and Culture: Essays in Honour of Dr P. L. Gupta*, ed. D. W. Macdowell, S. Sharma, and S. Garg (Delhi, 1992), p. 131.

3 See P. J. Turner, *Roman Coins from India* (London, 1989); J. Cribb, P. J. Turner, 'Numismatic Evidence for the Roman Trade with Ancient India', in *The Indian Ocean in Antiquity*, ed. J. Reade

author, in talking about trade, also notes instances of the distinctive religious customs of India. For instance, he remarks of the port of 'Komar' (Comorin): 'in it men who wish to lead a holy life for the rest of their days remain there celibate; they come there and they perform ablutions' (ch. 58, trans. Casson). Most significant here is chapter 64, towards the end, which both contains the earliest Classical reference to the name of China ('Thina') and explains that Chinese trade goods, including silk, were transported southwards to the Indian Ocean by one of two routes: either down to the west coast through Barygaza, or eastwards down the Ganges to the bay of Bengal, and then by way of 'Limyrike' (the southern part of the west coast) and the ports of Muziris and Nelkynda. 'Thina' is portrayed as 'a very great inland city', which we might locate in Kashgar in the extreme west of modern China. The journey from China was difficult and rarely undertaken: 'It is not easy to get to this Thina; for rarely do people come from it and only a few.' The author has no conception of a vast *country* called China.

The *Periplus*, full of fascinating details, confirms that in the first century AD there was an established seaborne trade from the Roman Empire to India, whose west coast was well known by traders sailing from Egypt. Whether or not a 'Silk Road' also existed in the period, its existence is not necessary to explain how Chinese silk reached the Mediterranean. Silk was one of the commodities regularly carried by sea from India and which could also have been transported up the Persian Gulf to the Euphrates, thence overland to the Mediterranean by way of Palmyra, where Chinese silk has been found.[1]

The existence of the seaborne trade in luxuries did not pass unnoticed in Rome; for Pliny the Elder, writing in the 70s of the first century AD, worries about the drain of currency required to pay for it, and mentions figures of 50 million or 100 million Roman *sesterces*.[2] It is easy to treat such figures as ideological projections of the sort already discussed, or as moralizing exaggerations; as they are by Moses Finley in his oft-quoted work on *The Ancient Economy*.[3] But caution is in order. We may not wish to believe the report in Strabo's *Geography* that, at the end of the first century BC, 120 ships made the voyage to India each year.[4] But even if the

---

(London, 1996), p. 309; V. Begley and R. D. De Puma, *Rome and India: The Ancient Sea Trade* (Madison, 1991); R. Thapar, 'Black Gold: South Asia and the Roman Maritime Trade', *South Asia*, xv (1992), 1.

1 See most recently A. Stauffer, 'Textiles from Palmyra: Local Production and the Import and Imitation of Chinese Silk Weavings', *Annales Archéologiques Arabes Syriennes*, xlii (1996), 425.

2 Pliny, *Naturalis Historia* vi. 26/101 (50 million *sesterces*); xii. 1/84: 'India, Seres [China?] and that peninsula [Arabia] take from our empire each year 100 million *sesterces*' (Loeb ed., iv. 63).

3 M. Finley, *The Ancient Economy* (2nd ed., London, 1985), p. 132.

4 Strabo, *Geography* i. 5, 12, 118 (Loeb ed., i. 453).

number is halved, or quartered, recently published documentary evidence obliges us to re-examine Pliny's figures. A Greek papyrus from Egypt first published in 1985 contains a contract for the transport of goods from the Red Sea coast of Egypt to Koptos on the Nile, and then downriver to Alexandria.[1] Here is the western, land-based, continuation of the trade routes described in the *Periplus*. But the papyrus also provides a glimpse of trade in the eastern and southern sections of the Indian Ocean. The second half of the document concerns the repayment of loans for which a written agreement had been drawn up – 'in the agreements concerning a loan [made] at Muziris'. Some of the cargo of the *Hermapollon*, the ship mentioned, must therefore have originated from Muziris, situated in the south of India, and the 'agreements' (*syngraphai*) referred to will have been drawn up there in Greek. Among the goods carried was 'Gangetic nard', which must have been shipped from Bengal round modern-day Cape Comorin before being loaded at Muziris for the voyage to Egypt. The most striking item in the document, however, is the figure given for the total value of the *Hermapollon*'s cargo: 1,154 *talanta* and 2,852 *drachmae* in silver, equivalent to 7 million Roman *sesterces*. Only a small number of ships of the size of the *Hermapollon* would have been required to match even the larger of the figures given by Pliny the Elder. When reading the papyrus, we are not in the realm of fantasy, but in the real world of the author of the *Periplus*.

Nothing stated here should be taken as offering a clear disproof of ideas or notions entertained in the modern world. The 'Silk Road' across Central Asia may have existed, and the Iranians may have been imbued with dualistic conceptions of the world, which perhaps influenced Judaism, during the Captivity or after, or lay behind Mani's heretical preaching. The study of the social, cultural, and religious history of ancient Iran, however, has hardly begun, nor can we yet place the Greek inscriptions of Central Asia, including the two Buddhist proclamations of Aśoka, in an historical setting. Only with the seaborne trade of the first century AD do we place our feet on firm ground.

Brasenose College, Oxford

1 See, e.g., L. Casson, 'New Light on Maritime Loans: P.Vind. G 40822', *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, lxxxiv (1990), 195.